

Local Knowledge and the Transformation of Gender Identities of Businesswomen in the Informal Economy

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Knowledge transforms human behavior. Knowledge is power, as it gives individuals the authority to make decisions and transactions. Formal knowledge institutions exclude and differentiate people on the basis of being knowledgeable or unknowledgeable. Formal knowledge is commoditized and has to be bought. It is structured into the school system, which in Kenya begins in nursery school and continues into higher institutions of learning. The school system by nature excludes a large number of people, who drop out at various cycles of learning or fail to pass examinations. All these people who are excluded from the school system find their way into the informal economy.

The informal economy has a mix of entrepreneurs with various levels of education, age, and ethnicity. They also possess a diversity of knowledge systems. We cannot, therefore, talk of *one* indigenous knowledge base. Instead, we have multiple local knowledges that have a direct bearing on individuals' identities and behavior. This paper examines the role of local knowledge in the transformation of female gender identity.

Local Knowledge and Gender Identity Conceptual Concerns

Local knowledge in the informal economy: The informal economy comprises a wide range of economic activities, the majority of which are small-scale in nature. According to the International Labor Office (ILO), the informal economy is characterized by the following:

- ease of entry
- reliance on indigenous resources
- family ownership of enterprises
- labor intensive and adapted technology
- skills acquired outside the formal school system
- unregulated and competitive markets (ILO 1972)

The informal economy is like a backyard activity that differs from the formal mainstream economy in several areas. The informal economy is dominated by men and women who trade and manufacture products using low-level local technologies. Products manufactured in the informal economy include metal, plastics, furniture, garments, and foodstuffs. A range of repair activities such as motor vehicle repair and tire retread also take place in the informal economy. Other products traded in the informal economy include cereals and pluses, fruits and vegetables (Macharia 1997; McCormick 1988).

Local knowledge is a significant component of the informal economy. Men and women learn to engage in business practices, and acquire skills, values and norms that are defined and transmitted through local knowledge. The entrepreneurs' identities are constructed and shaped by local knowledge. Local knowledge contributes to the evolution of an enterprise culture that determines the behavior of entrepreneurs in the cluster. Local knowledge is just

that knowledge held locally by local people.

The harsh working conditions in the informal economies, which are due to the lack of infrastructure and technologies to make work easier, contribute to the creation of tough and aggressive entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs, both male and female, learn to live with each other with minimum conflicts. One result of this for women is that, by learning to be an entrepreneur, there is the risk of losing her feminine attributes, as defined by local cultural norms. Thus, the songs *Mama Kiwinya* and *Mama Njoro* lash out at successful business women who turn their young male workers into lovers. Songs and dances are local attempts to codify and institutionalize local knowledge. There is, however, a lot of knowledge that flows within the local informal economy that is not accounted for and that can change human behavior.

Technical and business management skills are learned on the job; for example, teaching young men and women how to make products such as metal grills and garments. They learn business skills from experienced entrepreneurs through trial and error, observation, and practice. The duration of on-job training ranges between six months and one year, depending on the learner's ability. No books are used in the learning process. For example, there are no structured lesson plans used in garment making, and beginners start learning simple tasks of dressmaking using paper rather than cloth.

Social relationships and networks (for example, family and ethnicity) are important in local learning. Parents ask people they know to train their daughters and sons. Upon graduation, the learners work under the supervision of their trainers before they go on to start their own business or find employment elsewhere.

Local knowledge imparts values and norms that are crucial not only to successful entrepreneurship but that also are relevant to the construction of gender identities. The values and norms determine "who one is" and how one should behave as an entrepreneur, or as man or woman. In particular, local knowledge not only facilitates communication but also regulates behavior that is later transformed to entrepreneurial and gender identity. Oral transmission is the main avenue through which local knowledge is transmitted. One-to-one conversation or group conversations are central to local knowledge transmission.

Popular songs and dances constitute attempts to institutionalize local knowledge. For example, there are several pop songs played in the Kikuyu language where singers express their experiences or observations of activities taking place in the informal economy. Pop songs such as *Mama Kiwinya*, *Mama Njoro* and *Taarab* songs are instrumental in transmitting local knowledge and values. These three groups of songs castigate women whose behavior is not in accordance with their gender identity. Learning how to become an entrepreneur is also part of the local knowledge. Some songs tell about the hardships and activities experienced in the informal economy. Some songs serve as reminders of behavior and moral standards for such entrepreneurs, especially women. Transmitters of local knowledge in the informal economy include old entrepreneurs who have accumulated knowledge over time, peers, and solidarity group members. Observation, listening, and practice are the main methods of learning in the informal economy where learning is a continuous process. Local knowledge is a mixture of indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge of doing business.

Female gender identity in the informal economy: Many women entrepreneurs in the informal economy are strong, aggressive, self-assertive, and independent. However, many women

entrepreneurs agree that prior to joining entrepreneurial endeavors in the informal economy they did not have these attributes. They acquired and learned them as they went about their business in the informal economy.

They define the informal economy as a learning environment with its own ways of transmitting local knowledge to participants. Local knowledge in the informal economy is different from what one learns from schools and seminars. Local knowledge is generated by the needs of the informal economy, and consists of trade and business secrets, entrepreneurial behavior, production techniques, and customers relationships. Our concern is gender identity and entrepreneurial behavior, and how women entrepreneurs in the informal economy learn to change their traditional gender identity of being meek, timid, fearful and dependent.

Female gender identity is the conscious state of being feminine. Identity is a stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is in the world and it is embedded in social interactions. It is the state of being a woman, regardless of where one is—in the household, the community, or the nation. Feminine gender identity is acquired through a long process of social engineering involving rituals and local knowledge passed on during a woman's life cycle. The feminine identity evolves from the days of innocent childhood to adolescence, and finally to being a woman. Key aspects associated with feminine attributes include being seen as dependent, submissive, nurturing, and indefatigable. Women are encouraged to develop these attributes through all the stages of female gender identity formation.

Due to ease of entry, the informal economy is a place for all to try their own luck in business. Indeed, many Kenyans depend on the informal economy for their livelihoods (McCormick 2001). However, there are marked differences in the types of businesses men and women operate. There is a heavy women presence in food, cereals, and garment making—sectors that are traditionally regarded as women activities. Often, women's businesses are smaller than those run by their male counterparts: male-owned enterprises have a mean employment of 2.6 workers, while female-owned businesses have a mean employment of 1.6 workers (McCormick 2001).

Local Knowledge and the Transformation of Female Gender Identity

The first things that we must address are (a) whether local knowledge is gender neutral, and (b) whether men and women are exposed to the same knowledge. Local knowledge in the informal economy is not gender neutral. Information and ideas that flow in the informal economy clusters are distinctly divided into women and men's knowledge. The peer and solidarity groups that transmit local knowledge are divided into men- and women-operated groups, as group membership is determined on the basis of gender. Women entrepreneurs form women-only merry-go-rounds and other support groups. Men do the same for themselves. For example, members of a women-only merry-go-round will support a colleague who has had a baby. They will visit the colleague and make some monetary contributions. They also will support each other in the payment of hospital bills and funeral expenses, or in the purchase of household goods such as utensils. These support activities are commensurate with the traditional female gender identity at the household level.

Women entrepreneurs do not want to be seen behaving like men. They prefer to perform activities in a collaborative manner. They prefer to support one another and work together as women. In these groups, women share their experiences in their businesses and

their homes, encourage each other, and learn together how to be “good” and successful entrepreneurs in the informal economy and in the household. In one women’s group consisting of rice traders, members who face gender-related crises are supported. For example, the group offers credit to women who have not been given permission by their husbands to obtain loans.

Women entrepreneurs also have learned to save money in merry-go-rounds, since they do not want their husbands to learn that they have some extra income. One woman entrepreneur said, “If my husband learned that I have extra money somewhere, he will abandon his household responsibilities of supporting me and the children. For this reason, I have to understate my earnings from my business.” This woman chooses to hide her financial independence and avoid the appearance of a position of empowerment in the household. She still wants to see her husband as the boss and breadwinner in the household.

Although women appreciate and are happy about their newly acquired self-image as independent businesswomen, they do not want to lose their feminine identity in the household. Moreover, successful women are objects of public policing and scrutiny, which implies that successful businesswomen who are independent and assertive act within a cultural setting that openly approves or disapproves of behavior associated with their identity. Indeed, success is measured and seen through the eyes of patriarchy. Why are women concerned about their gender identity while running a successful business? The demand for women to be morally upright is stronger than it is for men in patriarchal holdings and relationships. Women are mothers and are seen as moral icons for the society. They bring up children and keep societal morals in place. In summary, the patriarchal construct sets very high moral standards for women. These moral standards seem to be constructed on the basis of the women’s reproductive roles and nurturing of future generations which make women the custodian of morality. It therefore can be argued that in the informal economy, women have to learn to maintain their status quo within the traditional community, no matter what their economic success as businesswomen.

Who I am I? On the Road to Self Discovery

Local knowledge is subordinated to formal scholarship knowledge. Women entering the informal economy usually have only some basic education and have not had much exposure to the feminist ideologies propagated by educated women, who are largely based in institutions of higher learning. These educated women have played a significant role in articulating the gender discourse, but this discourse seldom reaches the local level spaces such as the informal economy (Asspas 2002).

Formal discourse typically depicts women in the informal economy as being exploited, underprivileged, and disempowered (Mbote and Kiai 1993; Nzomo 1993; Nasimiyu 1993; Oduol 1993). In the Kenyan gender discourse, in particular, women are seen as victims of poverty, patriarchy, and the masculine-embedded capitalist mode of production. Women tend to release themselves from these oppressive systems by becoming entrepreneurs. As entrepreneurs they undergo a process of social engineering that differentiates them from other women. This is because, as they learn to become entrepreneurs, they also learn to be “women.” The process of local learning generates two types of women. The first category of women manifests a dual identity; that is, when they are at home they are obedient and

submissive, and when they are at work in the informal economy they are tough and aggressive. The second category is comprised of women who rebel and abandon patriarchal controls.

Case 1: Wambui founded her business in the informal economy in an attempt to escape her family's poverty. Before she settled on her current garment-making business, she tried her hand at several other businesses, including a hair saloon and a grocery shop. These businesses failed, but she did not give up. She decided to start a garment-making business, which is doing well. She attributes her success to hard work, aggressiveness, and self discipline: "I do not leave anything to chance. I set myself objectives and targets that I must fulfill everyday. I also do not let learning opportunities pass by."

She also describes herself as an "all rounder." Although her business is traditionally a women's activity, she handles everything in the supply and production end of her business. She cuts, stitches, and markets her products all by self. Whenever she sees a new product design in garment shops in the city, she quickly copies it and begins making similar products. This is how she manages to keep up with fashion. At home Wambui describes herself as a "good wife and mother." She does not let her newly acquired financial independence affect her family. She is a strong believer in the family institution and will go to any length to support it. Wambui says, "My reproductive role comes before my business activity."

She also notes that "the business environment is a source of knowledge. Over the years, I have gained experience and obtained information from my female colleagues with whom I have shared my business and family problems. Whenever one of us has a problem in business or at home we counsel each other. If the problem involves being away from business, one of us stands in her place. If the problem involves money, we support her by contributing some money."

Case 2: Kisa dropped out of school at the primary level and she is divorced. She trades in cereals and attributes her success to hard work, aggressiveness and self determination. She performs tasks normally not done by women, such as carrying heavy bags of cereals. She starts her day early, at 6:30 a.m. In the market, she struggles and competes with men in order to obtain good quality cereals. At home, she carries out responsibilities that traditionally are handled by the man of the family, such as educating children, investing in assets like land, and buying household goods. She also observes that she has to work harder than other women, because she is the head of her household and she has nobody else to turn to when things go wrong.

Case 3: After Nyambura failed her CPE examination, her father took her to a dressmaking and tailoring institute. She graduated after two years but was not able to get a job. Her father then decided to start a small business for her in one of the city market stalls; however, apart from her technical skill in dressmaking, she did not have any management and marketing skills. Green from school, she used to get angry with customers who would ask her questions and then leave without buying her products. She also used to fear the male city security officers and market fee collectors who frequented her stall.

Nyambura nearly stopped doing business because of the many problems she faced as a young woman. Her choices were limited and she did not know what to do next. She

approached an older woman in the market for help on how to behave. Nyambura says she owes a lot to this woman, because she is the one who taught her how to behave as a woman entrepreneur. The old lady told her: “You have to be tough and stop getting angry with customers who ask several questions. You never know, tomorrow they will be your customers.” Nyambura learned slowly to be tough and never take her customers for granted. She learned the patience to answer many questions from her customers and the initiative to tell them about the new products she was making.

However, her “toughness” at her place of work was in conflict with her position in her household as a wife and a mother. Her newly acquired independence was in conflict with her traditional relationship with her spouse. In the end, she had to wear two hats: Nyambura the entrepreneur at the market, and Nyambura the wife and mother at home. Although the income Nyambura brought home was vital to the household budget, it did not raise her status in the household. She still consulted her spouse whenever major decisions were to be made in the household (for example, in purchasing plots and animals). She also had to consult her spouse when she made remittances to her parents in their rural home in Makuyu.

The three case studies reflect both conformity and rebellion against the power of a patriarchal society. Wambui took the option of conforming, while Kisa and Nyambura rebelled. However, all of them were happy with their positions and strongly felt that their peers in the informal economy supported them. They have developed a sense of self of which they are proud. Although local knowledge and information has helped them transform or maintain their identities, each followed an individual pathway to reach her identity as a businesswoman in the informal economy.

Conclusions

Although feminist ideas are not well articulated in local knowledge and in the informal economy, women entrepreneurs negotiate their identity within the process of becoming businesswomen. They make decisions regarding their identity as to whether to conform or rebel against patriarchy or the masculine-embedded capitalism. Gender awareness in the informal economy is limited and women make decisions about their identity with the available information.

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